

the President signs this bill. The House and Senate have found a compromise that works for both parties. The version we passed in the Senate passed with 68 votes, more than enough to override a veto. The compromise version is very much like the Senate version, even though some of us would like to see us do a bit more.

The compromise would cover 4 million American children, as I said, 75,000 of them living in my State of Ohio. These children did not choose to be uninsured. They are not uninsured because their families walked away from private insurance. Understand, most of the children in the Children's Health Insurance Program are sons and daughters of working parents, parents who are working hard, playing by the rules, simply not making enough money to buy private insurance, and their employers are not providing that insurance.

The fact is, private insurance too often steers clear of too many working families in Akron and Toledo and Zanesville and Marion and Lima and Marietta. These families are uninsured because they have no choice. Their children have no choice. But we have a choice. We can choose to help them. Let's do it.

Thank you, Mr. President.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The Senator from New York.

NICS IMPROVEMENT ACT AND LEAHY-SCHUMER AMENDMENT

Mr. SCHUMER. Mr. President, I rise to speak about H.R. 2640—it is called the NICS Improvement Act—and the Leahy-Schumer amendment.

I have worked long and hard on this bill. It has been a long time in coming. Now it is time to get it passed. To put it simply, the young man who was behind the great tragedy at Virginia Tech had a long history of mental illness but still fell through the cracks of our checking systems and bought guns and ammunition.

It is against the law for someone with serious mental illness to buy a gun. When the system fails, we are all less safe. This bill will get desperately needed resources to the States to help improve our Federal background check process. This bill will make it harder for someone to get lost in the system.

We cannot wait any longer before passing this commonsense piece of legislation. We cannot sit back and watch another Virginia Tech shooting happen without doing everything we can to stop it.

I have worked hard on this bill for more than a decade and the background check system to which it is added. In 2002, Representative CAROLYN MCCARTHY and I introduced legislation similar to what I am discussing today. It was in response to another senseless shooting. This one was at Our Lady of Peace Church, in our State, in Lynbrook, on Long Island. That was where someone with a long history of

mental illness bought a gun, walked into Our Lady of Peace Church, killed Father Lawrence Penzes and a longtime parishioner, Eileen Tosner.

So back then we introduced a bill to get money to the States to help them get important records—on mental illness, convictions, things such as that—into the NICS system. But because of the climate of mistrust on all sides of the gun issue, that bill was never passed into law. I believe it passed the House once. I believe it passed the Senate once. But the two never hooked up.

Now, here we are again. It saddens me that it has taken this long—it has been years since Our Lady of Peace; it has been 5 months since Virginia Tech—to move the debate forward and try to get something done about safety on our streets and college campuses.

Now we are so close. The House has passed similar legislation that went through with the support of both the NRA and the Brady Campaign. That does not happen too often. As you know, when the NRA and I agree on an issue, there is a good chance some good can come of it.

We already have a comprehensive background check system, but since the system relies on up-to-date computer searches to produce fast results, it is only as good as the automated information the States provide. That is why the focus of the bill is to get more records into the system. So under the bill, States that opt into the system that do well will be rewarded with grants and financial incentives. States that do not will be punished.

We have modified that so smaller States that have more difficulty keeping the records because they have smaller budgets will not be penalized. Senator LEAHY correctly insisted that be done to protect his State of Vermont. But it affects smaller States as well. The amendments Senator LEAHY has suggested and been added to this bill, I believe, improve it without getting any of our delicately balanced coalition out of kilter in any way. So I thank Senator LEAHY for doing that.

Perhaps the most important thing I can say about this bill is it is all about public safety. It is all about enforcing the laws on the books. This is not—and this is important—is not a gun control bill. No lawful gun owners are going to have their guns taken away. Nobody who should be allowed to get a gun will have his or her rights restricted.

The bill targets only those records that are supposed to be in the system already—records that demonstrate whether someone is seriously mentally ill, a felon, or so on. What Virginia Tech showed us is when the background check system fails, the consequences can be terribly tragic.

Congresswoman CAROLYN MCCARTHY and I saw that in Long Island and, of course, the Nation saw it at Virginia Tech. Nothing can bring back the 33 young people who died last April, and we do not know if we can prevent another Virginia Tech from happening,

but our bill will take a substantial step toward making the system better and keeping our streets and schools safer.

I yield the floor.

VOTE EXPLANATION

Mr. DOMENICI. Mr. President, I was unable to cast a vote on Friday, September 21, on amendment No. 2898 to the Defense authorization bill. I have voted against similar measures in the past, and had I been available to vote on Friday, I would have again voted against this attempt to direct a precipitous withdrawal of U.S. troops from Iraq.

The terms of this amendment would have required U.S. troops to begin leaving Iraq within 90 days of the Defense authorization bill's enactment and complete that withdrawal within 9 months. While I understand public frustration with the war, I believe a precipitous and arbitrary withdrawal mandated by Congress is not a wise solution to the situation in Iraq. I cannot support attempts to set an arbitrary deadline for withdrawing our forces from Iraq, which endangers our troops, our safety at home and the overall stability of Iraq and the Middle East.

I believe our military commanders should determine how and when our troops begin leaving Iraq based on conditions on the ground. General Petraeus announced this month that he would be able to begin withdrawing U.S. forces from Iraq. I believe Congress should rely on the guidance and leadership of General Petraeus and our other commanders on the ground to determine how best to eventually bring our troops home from Iraq.

CHILDREN'S HEALTH INSURANCE PROGRAM

Mr. BAUCUS. Mr. President, the Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr., wrote: "The time is always ripe to do right."

This week, the time is ripe to do right by America's children.

Last Friday, my colleagues and I unveiled a strong, bicameral agreement to renew and improve the Children's Health Insurance Program.

CHIP covers kids whose parents don't qualify for Medicaid, but who cannot afford costly private insurance.

CHIP works to get health coverage to uninsured kids in America's working families.

The agreement we reached to renew CHIP will make sure that more than 6½ million children with health coverage today will keep that coverage.

The agreement we reached will make sure that millions more low-income, uninsured American children get a healthy start.

It is a good agreement. It is fiscally responsible. It has broad support across the Congress. And most importantly, it puts children first.

In August, 68 Senators voted for nearly the exact same \$35 billion agreement to renew and improve the Children's Health Insurance Program. They